



**ST. CROIX FOUNDATION  
FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**  
*Education First*

*St. Croix Avis*  
Editorial Series  
June 18 - October 28, 2014

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**St. Croix Foundation for Community Development**

*Education First Editorial Series*

*St. Croix Avis, 2014*

**A MESSAGE FROM THE  
ST. CROIX FOUNDATION FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

From June 18th - October 30th, 2014, the St. Croix Foundation offered a variety of articles in our local newspaper on issues that we believe our community needs to consider to achieve system-wide educational reform. Leading up to the 2014 November election, the editorial series, which was a part of the Foundation's Model Schools Initiative, aimed to achieve several goals: to encourage honest dialogue within the community, to create awareness about the importance of public education, and to make system-wide reform the highest priority for policymakers and elected officials.

Recognizing that it is much easier to discuss how to correct faults in the physical plants of our schools than it is to discuss how to correct flaws in the *system* itself, the Foundation's challenge to everyone in our community is to consider the following: What does our education system look like? What does our community value when it comes to education? What does the global economy demand of our children? And, what is our *vision* for our children and our Territory?

As one of the most vocal advocates for Comprehensive Public Education Reform in the US Virgin Islands over the past 10 years, St. Croix Foundation believes strongly that almost all roads surrounding our most critical socioeconomic problems lead back to education. We urge every community stakeholder to join us in our efforts to ensure the Territory's future stability and prosperity by deciding to put *Education First!*

*For more information on the St. Croix Foundation for Community Development  
and the Model Schools Initiative, please contact us directly at 340.773.9898.*



**St. Croix Foundation for Community Development**  
*Education First Editorial Series*  
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**EDUCATION FIRST**  
**A Brighter Future for our Children**

*June 8, 2014*

The U.S. Virgin Islands faces many challenges. The one common point of agreement is that the future of our islands depends on our children. Their education, physical and emotional health, and the opportunities provided to them are essential to creating a brighter future for all who reside here. In editorials, legislative hearings, conversations on the stoops around the islands, and on talk radio, most are in agreement that we are failing to educate our children in a way that will ensure their success, and that we need to take action to overcome that failure. The complication continues to center on how to accomplish this reform.

In this spot, for the next twenty weeks up until Election Day, the St. Croix Foundation will be offering a variety of articles on issues that our community needs to consider to achieve system-wide educational reform. They are not meant as prescriptive but as conversation starters for honest dialogue within the community. Recognizing that it is much easier to discuss how to correct faults in the physical plants of our schools than it is to discuss how to correct faults in the system itself, we want to challenge everyone in our community to consider the following: What does our system look like? What does our community value when it comes to education? What does the global economy demand of our children? And, what is our vision for our children and our Territory? We believe that delving deep into these questions needs to be a high priority in our communities and for our elected officials and policy makers. It is urgent that we begin now.

As one of the most vocal advocates for Comprehensive Public Education Reform, St. Croix Foundation also recognizes that, in many cases, our students are surpassing the successes of their parents and grand-parents despite our schools' urgent needs. The Territory actually has solid groundwork for rapid reform:

- 37% of our teachers have a master's degree; 1% have a doctoral degree.
- Our dropout rate of 9.1% for high school students is only slightly higher than the national average.
- Graduation rates rose from 61.4% in 2011 to 64.9% in 2012.
- Program participation allowing students to recover lost credits doubled from 2011 to 2012.
- SAT scores are being sent to 50 colleges and universities besides UVI.
- Excellent vocational programs are available.
- Gifted and talented programs are available at the elementary level and magnet programs are offered at the secondary level.
- Our schools offer highly valued programs in music and visual arts.

Yes, gains have been made, but the truth remains that many students are simply not achieving what we should expect in a progressive society. Although our achievement scores show some improvement over time in some areas, the majority of our young people are not literate. This is not

surprising with only 31% of our core classes being taught by a teacher rated as “Highly Qualified” - down from 45% the previous year. Tragically, only 55% of our teachers are certified.

Overall, however, we are acutely sensitized to the one fact that is often overlooked in discussions about our nation's public schools' failures, which is that public schools are just that: public and open to all. As a country, America decided long ago to provide education for everyone. This means that our educational system does not “weed out” students with the use of exclusionary testing at certain grade levels. They accept all. There is no entrance test to pass or financial contribution or standard to uphold for admittance. No matter what the child's background, preparation, native language, learning needs, or motivation, they have a seat in our public schools.

So, let us begin the dialogue. How do we, as a community, first recognize and then sustain the strengths that exist in our schools? How do we connect isolated successes to create support and trust between all stakeholders? How do we, collectively, decide on our best methods of reform? And finally, how do we convince elected officials and policy makers that there is a will of the people to get this done?

At the Foundation, we believe that we must involve the many competent teachers and administrators who are making a positive difference in our schools in the reform process. And then, we need to go beyond asking candidates what they think about education and begin to tell them what we expect of them if elected as pro-education candidates.

Your feedback is most welcome throughout the next 20 weeks. For more information on how you can join the conversation, contact us by phone at 773.9898. We hope you will join us in the effort to ensure a brighter future for all children in the U.S. Virgin Islands.



**EDUCATION FIRST**  
**Why We Dare to Try**

*June 25, 2014*

Over the last 25 years, education reform has emerged as a global, economic challenge. With the stakes extremely high, the private and nonprofit sectors are investing significant resources to investigate and implement reform initiatives they believe will yield the most rapid results. While most agree that community engagement is critical to the success of our schools, in many cases, motive and commitment are questioned when non-educators seek a seat at the table.

For the St. Croix Foundation, the reason we dare to delve into public education is simple: as a community foundation, we have committed ourselves to being responsive to emerging needs in our community. The deeper draw for us is that with our track record of countless successful initiatives in the areas of Community Revitalization, Economic Development, Public Safety, and Fiscal Sponsorship, we realized that almost all roads surrounding our community's most pressing socioeconomic problems lead back to Education.

In 2005, when we launched our Model Schools Initiative (MSI) at Elena Christian Junior High School (ECJH), we sought to develop a strategic, collaborative approach to raising student achievement scores. From day one, we were given considerable access to our schools, educators, and students. We spent five years witnessing, up close, the complex challenges that our schools face. The result has been extraordinary insight into what is working and what is not. While we were ultimately encouraged by the untold stories of success and the potential our public schools have to be innovative and effective, we were also privy to the ways that most were falling short of that potential.

Despite that reality, the Foundation has accomplished an incredible amount which we believe has afforded us the capital and credibility to speak on this issue. To date we have invested over 1 million dollars in our Territory's public education system to support some noteworthy achievements. During the first three years of our MSI, ECJH saw a nearly 70% reduction in discipline infractions, and 8th graders achieved a 30-point gain in math on their Virgin Islands Territorial Assessment Learning exams; In 2007, in partnership with HOVENSA, we oversaw the development of a state-of-the-art computer lab and underwrote the cost of a delegation of over 50 VI educators to attend the renowned Model Schools Conference in Washington, D.C.; In 2008, with funding from the VI Department of Education, the Foundation coordinated a delegation of over 300 teachers and education stakeholders to attend the Model Schools Conference in Orlando, Florida—the largest such delegation in the VI to travel abroad for training; In 2009, our work was recognized by the National School Boards Association, and we presented our story at their annual conference; In 2010, we published a report on our findings and hosted Community Roundtables and public forums to inform the public about successful national initiatives and international innovations that are taking place globally.

In the last several years, the Foundation's education work has shifted from programs to policy as we advocate for urgent action on behalf of our children. Grounded in the belief that equity and excellence in public education is the civil rights issue of our time, our mission is to be a catalyst and facilitator for real dialogue and collaborative solutions. How we educate our children must change rapidly and radically to ensure the economic stability and overall health of our communities.

In retrospect, the most important lesson we have learned through our work is this: system-wide, public educational excellence is within our reach and rapid improvement is more attainable than most people think. The catch is that the pathway to reform in the Virgin Islands is more a matter of will and fidelity than anything else. It is going to take greater focus on the part of every stakeholder, particularly our policy makers, to create a vision for education in the Virgin Islands and then to make that vision a reality.

As President Obama stated in 2009 at the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, "Despite resources that are unmatched anywhere in the world, America has let our grades slip, our schools crumble, our teacher quality fall short, as other nations outpace us. What's at stake is nothing less than the American dream." The St. Croix Foundation could not agree more.

In the weeks and months ahead, our editorial series will address some sensitive issues surrounding public education-- our children, our teachers, rigor, policy, and money. Some of the topics will undoubtedly be controversial, but we believe the conversations our editorials spark are a healthy part of the reform process. We hope you will join us, whether you agree or not. The future prosperity of our island and the wellbeing of our children deserve nothing less than our full attention. For those who still want to know why now and why us, we ask: why not now and who else?

For information, contact us at 340.773.9898.





**EDUCATION FIRST**  
**Our Children—Who are They, Who Can They Be?**

*July 6, 2014*

At the core of the St. Croix Foundation's commitment to our public education system is our children and our awareness of the amazing potential that lies in every one of them. But, the reality is that every day our social services and public safety agencies are forced to deal with many of the Territory's failures to serve the needs of our children with fidelity.

When we launched our Model Schools Initiative in 2005 and began to work directly in our schools, we didn't know how much insight it would provide about our children. Overall, what we learned about our students is very positive—they are talented and curious, gregarious and charismatic. They have the capacity to move from one unrelated subject to the next faster and more accurately than most adults do on their best day. Born in the Digital Age, our students have never known a time without computers or cell phones. Unfortunately, our young people's gift for navigating the Digital Age is our educators' biggest challenge: keeping students engaged with the same chalkboards, textbooks, and teaching strategies of 20 years ago.

We also found that our students span a vast range of individual competencies and family backgrounds, and we now stand in awe of what our schools accomplish in educating and nurturing all our children and doing so effectively—a daunting and high-stakes task. Even beyond the impact of the Digital Age, the average child today has an extremely different home life than those of just one generation past. According to the 2012 Kids Count, in just six years, the percentage of children living in single-parent households rose from 35% to 58.8% (from 2003-2009). Poverty rates have also increased: in 2010, 31% of all families in the Virgin Islands lived in poverty compared to 24.9% in 2009. On St. Croix, the 2010 poverty rate was 36%.

How our children are faring inside our schools is equally distressing. Based on the 2012-2013 Report Card from the Virgin Islands Department of Education, 68.2% of 7th graders are reading below grade level; and less than 36% of 11th graders are proficient in reading. This means that approximately 2 out of 3 of our 7th and 11th graders are not reading at grade level. The 2012 Kids Count also reported that 18.9% of our 16-19 year olds were not enrolled in school, were not graduates, and were not employed. Some believe the numbers are much grimmer. As a result, the Foundation is constantly grappling with a sense of urgency and an obligation to advocate for rapid improvements in our schools.

Over the last 10 years, we have spent a considerable amount of time visiting schools, learning first-hand their day-to-day challenges. We encourage all education stakeholders, especially candidates seeking elected office, to do the same. Some of the observations we made illuminated skill gaps that we believe make educational reform in the Virgin Islands a formidable challenge. In general, we found that a large number of students exhibited:

- Limited vocabulary, poor grammar, speech, and writing skills
- Lack of attachment to learning and/or academic excellence
- Limited exposure to the world beyond their immediate environments
- An inability to 'switch code' between local dialects and Standard English
- Extraordinary confidence in the face of their academic deficiencies

Recognizing these issues, in 2009, the Foundation launched our Youth Advisory Council (YAC) seeking to give a voice to our youth. Comprising junior high and high school students from our public and private schools, YAC members have sought to better understand the challenges facing their peers. In 2012 the Council surveyed over 900 of their peers and identified, overwhelmingly, that mentoring and motivation are their greatest needs! Among the expected responses, like violence and peer pressure, students also acknowledged in personal interviews “the need for self-confidence; lack of positive influences; lack of motivation; and a corrupt society.”

We *are* listening and we urge our entire community to take heed, because the bottom line for every one of our students is simple: they have an untold amount of talent and intellect that we, as a community, have failed to effectively nurture to their and our own detriment. Moreover, while all of the data and the statistics may indicate what is happening to our young people, numbers can never paint an accurate picture of who they really are. And no matter how we categorize and class our children, their potential is our potential.

We challenge everyone to get involved and to ask our candidates what **specific** education policies they plan to sponsor in support of the welfare of our children and our Territory.

This editorial is part of the St. Croix Foundation's *Education First* Campaign and will run every Wednesday for the next 17 weeks until the election in November. For more information, contact the Foundation at 773.9898.

#### **Sources:**

##### Percent of Children in Single Parent Households

US Virgin Islands Kids Count Data Book 2012, page 6:

[http://www.cfvi.net/documents/2012\\_KidsCount\\_Data\\_Book.pdf](http://www.cfvi.net/documents/2012_KidsCount_Data_Book.pdf)

##### Poverty Rates

US Virgin Islands Kids Count Data Book 2012, page 10:

[http://www.cfvi.net/documents/2012\\_KidsCount\\_Data\\_Book.pdf](http://www.cfvi.net/documents/2012_KidsCount_Data_Book.pdf)

##### Academic Scores

No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress Report, VI Department of Education:

<http://vide.nclbreports.avr247.com/VIDOE/Reports/web/VIDOE/OverAllAYP.aspx>

##### Non-graduates/unemployed 16-19 Year Olds

US Virgin Islands Kids Count Data Book 2012, page 6:

[http://www.cfvi.net/documents/2012\\_KidsCount\\_Data\\_Book.pdf](http://www.cfvi.net/documents/2012_KidsCount_Data_Book.pdf)



**EDUCATION FIRST**  
**Cracking the Code - Together!**

*July 9, 2014*

Educators around the country and the world are racing to 'crack the code' and find the perfect recipe for reforming their underperforming educational systems. It's a race against the clock that underpins state economies, global competition, and the viability of entire civilizations. The same is true for the Virgin Islands as policymakers and education stakeholders continue to analyze solutions to improve the Territory's public school system.

For the past 10 ten years, St. Croix foundation has also sought to crack the code, exploring national models of educational excellence with one overarching mission: to advocate for and support innovative and sustainable strategies that will lead to rapid public education transformation. We have read about and personally witnessed groundbreaking programs both locally and abroad- ones we believe, if replicated with fidelity, could lead to radical improvements in our educational system.

But in order to get there, we have learned that *what* we do is much less important than the *how* we do it when building strong systems that best serve the needs of all our community's youth. In our research, we have also seen that long and short term goals are more often met when reform plans are built on a solid foundation of *collaboration*—broad-based and community inclusive. For the Foundation, *collaboration* is really the fundamental "How" to the issue of education reform.

Sadly, collaboration is also the greatest challenge for most education reform efforts as far too many stakeholders haven't fully mastered the art of working together. Thankfully, there are many models of collaboration for us to examine and model our reform efforts after, some of which we think are particularly noteworthy and could help the VI find solutions:

**RACE TO THE TOP:** In 2009, Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan launched Race to the Top (RTTT), and radically changed America's educational reform landscape. As the largest competitive granting program in the history of American public education, RTTT awarded \$4.35 *billion* through the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) to spur K-12 education reform. While the Territory (and all other outlying areas) was not eligible to participate in RTTT (Puerto Rico was), one criteria for applying was that states had to build broad collaboration into their strategies, which meant that major stakeholder groups had to sign off on each state's reform plan. States that passed the first round of the application process had to submit video presentations demonstrating collaboration and alignment between stakeholders including unions, boards of education, departments of education, political parties, business leaders, charter operators, parent groups, and more.

In the end, Delaware and Tennessee were chosen by the USDOE as the first states to be awarded RTTT grants and there's little doubt why. Both states took the challenge seriously and set a high

standard for radical and rapid reform. We urge local stakeholders to review their RTTT video presentations, which can be found on the St. Croix Foundation's Facebook page, to see what collaborative reform really looks like. It's an inspiring demonstration of Leadership and Commitment – one that our education stakeholders can model.

**VISION 2015:** Delaware's RTTT plan, "Vision 2015," resulted in an award of \$100 million and is a bold agenda designed to provide a world-class education to all public school students in Delaware. Developed by a coalition of education, government, business and civic leaders throughout Delaware, Vision 2015 established the following goals for the state's reform agenda: 1. Setting High Standards and Developing a Common Curriculum; 2. Developing and Supporting High-Quality Teachers; 3. Empowering Principals to Lead their Schools and; 4. Establishing a Simple and Equitable Funding System.

**L.A. COMPACT:** Another reform model is the L.A. Compact, which is a city-wide plan signed by 18 major stakeholder groups in the Los Angeles Unified School District that has become a national model of collaboration and common visioning. The L.A. Compact established the following goals (among others) for its reform efforts; 1. Achieve High Quality Teaching and Learning In Classrooms; 2. Build Collaborative Leadership Capacity; 3. Streamline and Decentralize Operations; 4. Expand Innovative Practices that are Working; 5. Implement a New Accountability System and; 6. Provide Students Multiple Pathways for Workforce/Career Preparation.

Education reform is too big of a task for just one group to tackle. The whole village needs to be a part of the process, recognizing that our children are pouring out of our schools and onto our streets unprepared in the midst of a depressed economy and an unprecedented crime wave. In the words of Rahm Emmanuel (Obama's former Chief of staff), we would be foolish "to let a good crisis go to waste." This election season, let's ask our political candidates how they intend to support collaborative efforts that serve our children and our schools.

This editorial is a part of the Foundation's *Education First* series and will be published every Wednesday until Election Day. For more information, call 773.9898.

#### **Resources:**

##### Race to the Top Eligibility and Criteria for Funding

- [Race to the Top Program Executive Summary](#), U.S. Department of Education, 2009

##### Race to the Top Video Presentations (2010)

- [Delaware: Phase 1, Tier 2 Presentation](#) (*awarded \$119 million federal grant funds*)
- [Tennessee: Phase 1, Tier 2 Presentation](#) (*awarded \$501 million federal grant funds*)

##### State Plans and Compacts

- Delaware's Race to the Top Reform Plan: [Vision 2015](#)
- Los Angeles Unified School District's Compact: [A Collaboration to Transform Education in Los Angeles](#)



## **EDUCATION FIRST**

### **It's the Teacher, It's the Teacher, It's the Teacher**

*July 16, 2014*

Over the last ten years, the St. Croix Foundation has worked inside classrooms, side-by-side with teachers. We have sat in on teacher team meetings, lunched with teachers, and walked the same hallways. We traveled with them to educational conferences, wept with them through trying times and celebrated in times of great triumph.

What we learned is that many of our teachers spend each day in isolation, dealing with disadvantaged, oftentimes ill-mannered students (and parents), not to mention a bureaucracy that can de-motivate the most energized professional. In actuality, many of the educators we have met have a real passion for pedagogy. They are unquestionably the single greatest assets in our public schools because they are the one *constant*. While administrators and students come and go, sometimes in rapid succession, teachers are the long-term caretakers of each school's history and culture and the foundation of our children's academic achievement.

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a lot is expected of teachers. They must be adept at using a variety of new technologies; keep up with popular culture; understand changing language and ideals; and spend many personal hours preparing new lessons and researching new teaching methodologies. They must also contend with the pressures of a bad economy, "hyperactive" students, and a lack of meaningful support from their superiors and the community at-large, all the while being forced to be both parent and teacher for many students.

As President Obama stated in one of his first speeches on education, "It's time to start rewarding good teachers, and stop making excuses for bad ones." We believe that in order for our community to 'walk the talk' about the importance of our children, our teachers—our good teachers—must be elevated to a higher stature and prominence matched with higher pay that is unequivocally married to high expectations.

#### **The Impact of Bad Teachers**

In reality, for the same reasons they are assets, our teachers can also be potential liabilities because, on the flip side of their tremendous contributions, there are also some critical deficiencies that require the diligent focus and attention of every public education stakeholder. From the very beginning of our on-the-ground work in schools, the Foundation began to observe some noteworthy performance patterns among our teaching pool, including: Use of the Union Contract as a guard against new ideas or personal accountability; Low expectations for themselves, administrators, and students; Resistance to the use of technology; A propensity for blaming "others" (administrators, parents, funding shortages, and etc.) for poor student performance; And, a sometimes shocking lack of professionalism and respect for authority.

Undoubtedly, ineffective teachers are a huge part of the challenge that lies before every effort to improve the quality of public schools *nationwide*. In reality, states throughout the country are afflicted with the same powerlessness and costliness that our local district administrators experience when attempting to create a greater density of good teachers while also removing bad teachers from the pool. In New York, hearings for a dismissal of just one incompetent teacher can extend for 830 days, over two years, and cost taxpayers \$313,000.

The arduous task of filtering underperforming teachers from the system is inextricably tied to the greater challenge of building a sufficient pool of high-quality teachers, particularly here in the Territory. In truth, the seldom discussed reality in our school system is that many of our teachers are homegrown products of our own public education system, moving straight through the system from Kindergarten to 12th grade, to the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI), and then right back into our classrooms. To fully understand the challenge, consider that in 2013 88% of UVI's freshmen were required to take remedial courses in English because they were not college-ready after graduation.

Luckily, there are proven models for attracting, training, and retaining effective teachers. In Finland, they decided that only the best and the brightest will teach their children: 100% of new teachers graduate in the top third of their high school class. In contrast, a math teacher in Oklahoma today is required to receive a score of at least 19 on the ACT test to be admitted to a college of education. At the time, the national average was 20.6.

We know we have extraordinary, talented, passionate teachers in the Virgin Islands, because we meet them every day. And, we know that the District is in the middle of implementing a new evaluation system, for which we applaud them. But, this election season, let's ask our political candidates how they plan to legislate even more comprehensive reforms that raise the bar, prepare, support, and compensate our teachers like the professional, highly qualified educators that all our children deserve.

This editorial is part of the Foundation's Education First series. For more information, call 773.9898.

#### **Sources and Links:**

President Barack Obama:

- [Remarks by the President to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on a Complete and Competitive American Education](#), March 10, 2009

New York Teacher Dismissal Data:

- <http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/firing-teachers-mission-impossible-article-1.1615003>, February 17, 2014

US Virgin Islands Remedial English Classes Data:

- [Literacy Across UVI](#), UVI Voice, University of the Virgin Islands, September 19, 2013

Finland and the United States:

- Ripley, Amanda. *The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way*. Simon and Schuster. 2013 (92-93).



## EDUCATION FIRST "The Finland Phenomenon"

July 23, 2014

Do you know who the smartest kids in the world are? Amanda Ripley, author of *The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got that Way*, recently decided to look for an answer. In her book, Ripley explores many of the myths surrounding 'smart kids' by following three American students who studied in some of the highest performing educational systems in the world.

What Ripley found was that 'smart kids' are found everywhere. They are found in classrooms with over 60 students, in ramshackle schools, without textbooks or even chalkboards. High performers are sometimes homeless, sometimes orphans, and yet they succeed. Why? According to Ripley and other researchers, many smart kids are smart because of *the teacher*. In fact, while culture, geography, and politics can vary widely, one thing is common between high performing students: a truly great teacher.

But unfortunately, it has not been easy for nations around the globe to build a larger pool of *master* teachers. In America, the job is even tougher. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) states that "American teachers work harder under much more challenging conditions than teachers elsewhere in the industrialized world. They receive less useful feedback, less helpful professional development, and have less time to collaborate to improve their instructional skills. Not surprisingly, two-thirds feel their profession is not valued by society -- an indicator that OECD finds is ultimately related to student achievement" (Darling-Hammond).

Luckily, we can ensure that all our young people have the best and brightest standing in front of every classroom by examining and implementing successful models that are transforming the teaching profession around the world:

**FINLAND:** To improve their education system, Finland relied heavily on improving teacher quality through restructuring teacher education programs. Today, as a result, 93% of their students complete high school on time (Tschudi). And, for the past decade, Finland has scored in the top tier of the Program for International Student Assessment-- the international equivalent of the SATs (OECD, p. 118). How did they do it?

First, as Ripley reported, they closed smaller schools of education and moved teacher preparation into the more respected universities (p. 88-89). At the same time, they raised the entrance standards for teacher-training programs, making the profession as "prestigious as a getting into medical schools in the United States" (p. 85). In Finland, all teachers are required to:

- Be in the top 1/3 of their high school graduating class (Auguste);
- Complete a rigorous application process, including taking special examinations specific to their desired course of study (Ripley, p. 84);



- Take three years of 'general' courses, including high level math and statistics (p. 86);
- Hold a Master's degree and complete a three-year graduate school preparation program that includes:
  - One year of internship *in a public school* under the tutelage of three teacher mentors who train and provide feedback that is at times, "harsh, in much the way medical residents are critiqued in teaching hospitals," and;
  - Complete original research (p. 86).

But, as an added bonus, Finnish high school teachers with 15 years of experience make 102% of what their fellow university graduates do and because Finland pays for a teacher's education, they graduate debt free. Contrastingly, in the United States, a teacher with a Master's degree earns just 65% of their peers and must carefully piece together grants, scholarships, and student loans to pay for their education (Tschudi).

A 2007 McKinsey report stated that, "the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" (Barber, p. 16). We couldn't agree more. In fact, we believe serious consideration must be given to the creation of a state-of-the-art teaching college in the USVI with the highest entrance standards and real-world, in-class instruction where teachers-in-training are mentored by master teachers and taught by local, regional, and international experts. And while some believe high entrance standards and a rigorous curriculum will discourage our youth from wanting to be teachers, consider this: Rhode Island's push to increase entrance standards at their School of Education initially met with controversy with its dean arguing that higher standards would discourage students from applying; instead, their application and admittance rate went up, even among minorities (Ripley, p. 92).

We think all will agree that our children deserve the best, and the Virgin Islands has the talent necessary to ensure they receive it. We encourage teachers, parents, and education stakeholders to visit the St. Croix Foundation's Facebook page and watch "The Finland Phenomenon," and this election season, let's all ask our candidates what models and policies they plan to support to improve teacher quality. Because, our children, here in *Virgin Islands, can be the smartest in the world...*

For more information, please contact us at 773.9898.

## Sources

*For information on the Program for International Student Assessment, visit their website here:*  
<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>

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**EDUCATION FIRST**  
**Keeping Our Children in School**

*July 30, 2014*

As the United States attempts to *race to the top* in education, for most school systems the challenge is how to keep American children in school so they graduate on time and with proficient skills to enter the global workforce.

In a new report by America's Promise Alliance at Tufts University entitled *Don't Call them Dropouts*, young people who had not completed high school were interviewed. The study found that, as most would assume, a lack of parental support is the leading reason that students drop out, usually accompanied by verbal or physical abuse and antisocial behavior on the part of their parents. The study also found that students were more likely to drop out if they were in foster care, homeless, or had an incarcerated parent (p. 9).

What was most surprising though is that over half of survey respondents reported that they did have strongly supportive parents but were *still* unable to overcome the factors of what the report calls "toxic environments." These toxic environments include life challenges such as the loss of a family member or friend, changing schools or living arrangements, delinquency, pregnancy and child care, and failing courses. In essence, the study indicates that no matter what, a student's success rate in school is directly related to whether they are able to *focus on school* and what happens when they are there (p. 17-20).

Of course, a prevailing and concurrent factor in the results of the study was the impact of child poverty. This socioeconomic status significantly affects a student's academic performance in school and likelihood of graduating. According to the 2013 Kids Count, in 2010 the USVI child poverty rate was 31%. The national average is 20% (p. 15). In addition, only 32.4% of our children are actually living with both their parents as opposed to 61% on the mainland (p. 10). That means that approximately 2/3 of our young people are living with relatives, nonrelatives, or in single parent households. Based on this data, for our children to graduate with proficient skills they will require greater supports in school and outside of school.

Another strong theme in this research was young people's need for social or familial connections wherever they can be found. Joining a gang or having a baby at age 16 are all signs of children seeking connectivity, which often leads to interrupted schooling. Optimistically, this same factor can also help a student to stay in school or to re-engage. The study indicates that almost half of the students who had a teacher who cared about them were less likely to leave school, and participating in after school activities and having the support of youth development workers were very important. Of those who graduated on time, over half of the sample lived in a "caring neighborhood" where there were adults who expected them to complete high school and who

looked out for them. It does indeed take a whole village to raise a child (Don't Call Them Dropouts, p. 24).

So what do we do? First and foremost, we must listen to our youth and place young people in central roles in designing and implementing solutions that will work for them and their peers. We must also follow the evidence and surround our highest-need students with extra supports.

According to studies by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins and the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, most students who drop out can be identified as early as 6th grade by attendance, behavior, and grades (Balfanz). Programs that focus on those struggling in 6th through 9th grades make sense. There is no reason to re-create the wheel. There are several well-tested programs succeeding at dropout prevention in other areas. We might suggest looking at the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program, Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success, Valued Youth Program (VYP), Check & Connect, or Talent Development high schools. In the words of Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, "All students should have the opportunity to achieve in high school and thrive in whatever career or college they pursue. We owe 100 percent of our students that chance."

This year, let's ask ourselves and our political candidates if our children are the priority. Are they prepared to support mentoring and counseling opportunities for 100% of our students? Will they ensure that support services for our students are funded and administered with fidelity? Join the conversation and get involved. For more information about the studies in this editorial, contact the Foundation at 773.9898.

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## EDUCATION FIRST

*August 6, 2014*

*The St. Croix Foundation's Education First series has generated a great number of positive responses from our community. The following editorial was submitted to the Foundation by Alan Smith of St. John.*

As technological innovations rapidly reduce or eliminate jobs, we must understand that education is more than training a person to find employment or pursue higher education. Education is a process that empowers individuals to discover the “gems of inestimable value” latent within them. Education cannot continue as a commodity produced by an industry that is focused on students’ standardized tests scores or measures a teacher’s performance by his students’ test scores. Rather, education must become a process through which all develop ever increasing capacity and skills needed to serve their community. That is, we must have an educational system that instills in children, parents and teachers an abiding appreciation that they are part of a community; a community that can only be sustained through interdependence, cooperation, reciprocity and respect for the contributions of all. The obsolete 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of rugged individualism, scarcity, competition and survival of the fittest must be abandoned. Such notions must be replaced by an ethos and pedagogy that pivots around the concept that humanity and the environment are both essential elements of an organic whole.

This is not to say that people will not or should not have to work for a living or that the material needs of a community can be met without employees, entrepreneurs and government services. Our educational system must continue to provide the necessary fundamentals of math, science, reading, etc. To be effective, however, our educational system must also ensure that every child learns what it means to be a contributing member of a community. Our children must be so educated that they know who they are, to what purpose they exist, how they should act towards one another and once they know the answers to these questions, they need to be helped to gradually apply these answers to everyday behavior. Teachers will necessarily require similar education. Teacher education must empower teachers to be miners of “gems of inestimable value”.

So, how is this supposed to happen? As with all human institutions, fundamental systemic change occurs when crisis forces us to adopt new attitudes. Perhaps our crisis will stimulate the following five attitude changes. First, if we are to educate the whole person, a general consensus must be developed and fostered that views education as both material and spiritual. Second, teachers must be valued as highly as the chief executives in business and government for without teachers there would be no chief executives. Third, teachers must view their profession as the most meritorious of all deeds; nothing less than an act of worship or prayer. Fourth, the community must regard the education of every child as its collective responsibility. And fifth, every parent and potential parent,

which means every student, must be trained to take responsibility for the educational preparation of their child and stay engaged in his or her child's educational journey.

Changing attitudes is a tall order that is always resisted. If, however, we refuse to change our attitudes the fundamental and systemic educational transformation we desire will not occur and the decline in the quality of our community life will continue unabated. Finally, we cannot continue to deny that ***“children are the most precious treasure a community can possess, for in them are the promise and guarantee of the future. They bear the seeds of the character of future society which is largely shaped by what the adults constituting the community do or fail to do with respect to children. They are a trust no community can neglect with impunity.”***

For more information on the Foundation's Education First series or how to join the conversation, please call 773.9898.



**EDUCATION FIRST**  
**The Real Deal about Infrastructure and Resources**

*August 13, 2014*

Over the last 24 years, St. Croix Foundation has learned some important lessons about effective philanthropy and how to best serve our community. More than just a grantmaker, we have grown skillful at identifying resources and building private-public partnerships to address the root causes to the problems we face. Today, in this era of fewer resources, we are also acutely aware of the need to prioritize investments and leverage scarce resources particularly for our struggling public schools. As our public sector reaches out to the private sector to fill funding gaps, with policies like mandatory EDC education “donations”, we believe that fidelity and accountability for the use of these funds is critical.

Our first lesson brokering partnerships between donors and our schools came many years ago when a generous EDC firm agreed to adopt one of our local high schools. We spent hours touring the campus and meeting with administrators to identify the most urgent needs. When all was said and done, the school pleaded and the donor conceded to repair *bathrooms*! Despite the vast academic needs of students and teachers at the school, we agreed to use those precious donor dollars to gut and retrofit one bathroom, to make it compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and to repair and paint 13 other bathrooms.

We expended more than \$25,000 that we believed could have been leveraged several times over. And, we also relieved the government of its obligatory responsibility to address *basic* infrastructure needs in our schools. While we were pleased to learn that the project had resolved the issue of handicap accessibility, which contributed to the school’s full accreditation, the experience taught the Foundation some profound lessons that have since informed how we guide and advise donors who are interested in providing resources and other supports to our public schools.

In fact, we may be one of a few non-profits in the Territory that consistently steers donors away from projects which we believe will not have lasting impact or the level of accountability necessary for success. We feel too strongly about the urgency of the most critical, *instructional-based* needs in our public schools and the importance of synergy in how private sector resources are used to address them.

What’s been interesting to us is that oftentimes when people in our community discuss our public schools, the conversation usually centers around the poor physical condition of our schools instead of focusing on reading scores or professional development for teachers. But, little of our research or our experiences point to infrastructure as a *significant* inhibitor to student achievement. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education’s 2008 report, *How Does the United States Stack Up?*, “In some of the countries that are now surpassing the U.S. in academic performance, students don’t have even a fraction of the basic resources and amenities we take for granted!”

Based on the knowledge we had at the time, when we launched our Model School Initiative in 20025, we fully expected to find *significant* infrastructure and resource deficiencies at our pilot school. Instead, what we found was quite to the contrary. Not only were there computers and white boards, along with a host of other technological resources, but we also found many of the same academic programs that were in use at some of the highest-performing stateside schools we had researched. In direct refutation of what we'd heard "on the street," we learned that the Department of Education had indeed been equipping teachers and administrators with high-quality instructional resources *and had dedicated significant funding toward teacher training in the utility of these programs*. But there was a catch: while some proven resources had been procured for our schools, we found numerous examples of poor follow-through in ensuring that those resources were actually being effectively implemented, institutionalized *and evaluated*.

Through these experiences and after realizing that the scattered computer resources at our pilot school made it impossible to test an entire class, we reached out to Hovensa. They responded in a big way, donating a state of the art technology center, with 30 flat screen computers, desks, commercial air conditioning, and new room enclosures at a cost of over \$125,000. The Foundation donated a new security system and paid for monitoring to protect Hovensa's costly investment. Our partnership with Hovensa was a perfect example of our strategy: brokering strategic private-public partnerships, leveraging scarce funding in order to provide students with the high-quality educational resources they need to be globally competitive.

We hope that the lessons we've learned serve to guide stakeholders in building effective, high-impact partnerships that create bridges to success for our schools and our students. We also hope that our elected officials and policy makers will promote private-public partnerships that are based on *substantiated need*, a fully articulated plan of action, accountability and transparency.

This editorial is part of the Foundation's Education First series. For more information, call 773.9898.



## EDUCATION FIRST Leadership in Our Schools

*August 30, 2014*

At the end of our 5 year partnership with several local public schools, we concluded that in addition to teacher quality, the issue of school leadership was equally critical and offered great opportunities for growth and system-wide educational reform. While nationally the educational reform spotlight is often focused on teacher training, technology, and curriculum standards, we have found that successful schools not only have great teachers but also have stable and dynamic *leaders*.

To begin this discussion, we want to first relate some hardcore facts about our experience with public education leadership. During the first four years of our partnership with our pilot junior high school, we saw 3 Principals, 6 Assistant Principals, 3 Insular Superintendents, 3 Acting Commissioners, and 2 confirmed Commissioners. Nothing else we could say more clearly illustrates what goes on at the helm of our public education system. To state it plain and simple, in our opinion, revolving doors do not a stable system make.

Now, we in no way mean to suggest that successful school districts don't employ some of the same rotation tactics that we see in the Territory, because they do. But, in most high performing school districts, once they find the quality of leadership they are comfortable with, they step back and let successful principals *lead*—even if it means watching scores slip a bit as whole-scale, long-term reform efforts get under way.

**Having spent time exploring what effective school leadership looks like, the reality is that principals have a herculean role to play in our schools. They are tasked with being caretakers of hundreds of students and faculty members, not to mention facility managers and instructional leaders. Based on national statistics, the average ratio of principals to student population is 1 to 306. In some cases in the Virgin Islands, the principal to student ratio is double that, causing our principals and assistants to struggle daily to build relationships *and* capacity for improvement among their many stakeholders- **teachers, students, parents, and community members.****

As it turns out, many of the characteristics found in great leaders in the corporate world are similar to those possessed by the leaders of great schools. Our experience indeed mirrors these findings as well as those of *From Good Schools to Great Schools*, whose authors identified the characteristics of strong educational leaders as: 1) Has compelling modesty, humble yet fearless; 2) Has unwavering resolve; 3) Nurtures a culture of discipline which promotes teacher responsibility; 4) Is persistent in hiring the right people; 5) Is passionate about student achievement; 6) Puts school first, before personal ambitions; 7) Builds strong relationships by exhibiting people skills.

According to our research, one of the most important characteristics is the last: *a principal's ability to build relationships*. It is the one area that great principals excel at beyond all others. While they



may not arrive on the job with extensive skills and experience in accounting, facility management, human resources, or labor law, great principals do have the skill, willingness, and yes, even eagerness, to build the relationships required to get the support they need from those who do know.

Today, understanding the importance of the role of principals, the Foundation has been struck by the degree to which the selection process for principals at public schools in the Virgin Islands remains almost entirely insular. In a field that is highly dynamic and at a time when global economics rules the day, it is perplexing that our principals (and other district leaders, for that matter) continue to be drawn solely from the ranks of our local teacher pool.

Of course, we are in no way suggesting that there are not highly qualified homegrown leaders already at the helms of some of our schools. In fact, if one takes a look at our highest performing public schools throughout the Territory, they need not look further than the principal. But, without sufficient “density” in our leadership pool, the prospect that all of our schools will be led by the brightest and the best remains slim. Ultimately, there are amazing stories of struggling schools that have transformed into higher performing schools in a short period of time—but the stories almost always begin with dynamic, resourceful, and strategically-minded principals who have a laser focus on success.

One recommendation we offer for dealing with this issue is to encourage Virgin Islands educators, who are leading successful schools on the mainland, to return home. But to do that we must first change local Board of Education policy that prohibits the hiring of leaders from outside our system. We must also provide all of our principals with the supports necessary to ensure their success. Another recommendation is to provide more of our educators with opportunities to intern at high performing schools abroad so they can obtain first-hand exposure to working in *healthy*, highly effective systems. This election season, let’s ask our elected officials what specific plans *they* will put in place to ensure high quality leadership at the helms of *all* our public schools.

For more information on the Foundation's Education First series, please call 773.9898.

### **Sources & Suggested Reading**

Center for Public Education: <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/principal-perspective>

Relationship Building: The First 'R' for Principals: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED501101.pdf>

*The Making of the Principal: Five Lessons in Leadership Training:*

<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/effective-principal-leadership/Pages/The-Making-of-the-Principal-Five-Lessons-in-Leadership-Training.aspx>



## EDUCATION FIRST Charter Schools... A Viable Option?

*September 3, 2014*

In 2009, Bill Gates released his first *Annual Letter* to update the nation on his foundation's work in education. At the time, we were concluding our work in several public schools and analyzing the data we had compiled. There were many commonalities between Gates' findings and ours, and his conclusions were not only instructive for the St. Croix Foundation but should be enlightening for our entire community.

Having spent over 2 billion dollars in nine years to raise college-ready graduation rates in public schools, Bill Gates acknowledged that the Gates Foundation **did not** achieve the results they wanted. In his words:

1. Many of the small schools that we invested in did not improve student achievement in any significant way. These tended to be the schools that did not take radical steps to change the *culture* such as allowing the principal to pick their team of teachers or change the curriculum.
2. We had less success trying to change an existing school than helping to create a new school.
3. ...a few of the schools that we funded achieved something amazing. They replaced schools with low expectations and low results with ones that have high expectations and high results. Almost all of these schools were charter schools that have significantly longer school days than other schools.

Today, after almost ten years of work in our public schools, our conclusions about how to achieve public education excellence are closely aligned with Gates' and others who are pushing for reform from outside the system. But, Gates' reference to charters was the single piece of data that struck us as interesting back in 2009 because, up to that point, the Foundation had not dedicated any attention to the issue of charter schools as a viable pathway for rapid educational reform. Instead, we had maintained our commitment to our Department of Education and the potential we still firmly believe it has to successfully close the achievement gap for our students. We decided to explore the issue further.

For those who do not fully understand what charter schools are, the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences defines them as: "Public schools that operate with freedom from many of the local and state regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Charter schools allow parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs, and others the flexibility to innovate and provide students with increased educational options within the public school system. Charter schools are sponsored by local, state, or other organizations that monitor their quality while holding them accountable for academic results and responsible fiscal practices."

Historically, charter schools have been vehicles for creating innovative educational opportunities for parents and students, which is why many proponents believe so strongly in them. They have also afforded educators opportunities to bypass governmental bureaucracies that stifle innovation.

Still, there is no guarantee that charters will offer students anything better than conventional public schools do and many have actually reported worse results—a real dilemma for parents and community leaders. However, there are a growing number of charter schools that are producing rapid and *extraordinary* results that we believe demand our consideration. Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education for the USDOE, summed the issue up like this, “I do not support charter schools. I support good charters.” We would add, we support *great* schools, whatever form they take.

Today, despite the fact that charters are independently run *public schools* and are popping up all over the country, there is great controversy that surrounds the word “charter,” primarily because at the core of the matter is *money*. As dollars that have been dedicated to failing schools are being re-directed to charters, political firestorms are becoming commonplace in underperforming school districts across the country.

As it stands, the Virgin Islands joins only 7 other states that have not passed charter legislation (Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia). And, while there is a charter school bill before the VI Legislature, the Foundation agrees with two key positions held by the National Alliance for Charter Schools: 1) charter schools are most successful when there is strong legislation governing their creation and operation and; 2) charter schools are just *one of many* components of successful 21<sup>st</sup> Century educational systems. Additionally, with the U.S. pledging billions of dollars to support innovative public school models, including charters, we believe the Territory would be remiss to not examine every reform strategy that could avail the VI of much needed educational funding to support our reform efforts.

We recommend that all education stakeholders (particularly parents *and policy makers*) review model legislation as well as our pending legislation at <http://usvisenate.org/policy-initiatives/charter-schools/> to broaden their understanding of charter schools. We also urge policy makers to research successful charters and great schools like the New American Academy, KIPP, the Harlem Children's Zone's Promise Academy and the Success Academies. This election season, let's ask our candidates how *they* recommend providing more choices for parents, opportunities for students, and the flexibility to innovate for principals and teachers.

This editorial is part of the St. Croix Foundation's *Education First* Campaign. For more information, call 773.9898.

#### **SOURCES:**

[Bill Gates Education Reform Findings](#)

*Annual Letter 2009*, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, pages 10-13:

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/who-we-are/resources-and-media/annual-letters-list/annual-letter-2009>

*(Sources Continued)*

Charter School Definition

US Department of Education:

<http://www2.ed.gov/parents/schools/choice/definitions.html>

States with Charter School Legislation

The Heartland Institute: Ideas that Empower People

<https://www.heartland.org/policy-documents/research-commentary-states-without-charter-schools-are-falling-behind>

**General Information**

U.S Virgin Islands Charter Legislation: <http://usvisenate.org/policy-initiatives/charter-schools/>

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools: <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/>

New American Academy: <http://www.thenewamericanacademy.org/>

KIPP - The Knowledge is Power Program: <http://www.kipp.org/>

Harlem Children Zone's Promise Academy: <http://hcz.org/our-programs/promise-academy-charter-schools/>

Harlem Children Zone's Success Academy: <http://successacademies.org/>



## EDUCATION FIRST Understanding Our Board and Commissioner of Education

September 10, 2014

From the inception of our work in public education, we have had many questions over the years when it comes to our schools like: Who's really in charge? Who is responsible for making sure our schools are ready for teachers and students at the start of each school year? Are our schools really adequately funded? How and why are principals selected or transferred?

The St. Croix Foundation has deduced that our educational system can at times be extremely confusing as the maze of policies and governing bodies have often confounded us and have been difficult to navigate. As stakeholders *outside the system*, we have also been surprised to note that the system has appeared to be confusing even for some *inside the system*. That's why over a year ago St. Croix Foundation convened a steering committee comprising committed and engaged community stakeholders from each District to begin seriously researching 'the system' in order to better understand the policies that govern it.

One of the most interesting findings we have uncovered is that our local Board of Education functions very differently than boards in most states. Affirming this observation, a 2002 study by the University of the Virgin Islands concluded that the Virgin Islands Board of Education is more of an advisory board whereas many boards in the states, in addition to setting and evaluating policy, have the power and authority to actually hire and fire superintendents and select commissioners.

Surprisingly however, in the Bylaws that govern our Board of Education, the Board is defined as an independent agency that is "responsible for the general policy and direction of education in the Virgin Islands." According to Title 17 of the V.I. Code, the Board is also responsible for promulgating rules and regulations for the certification of all elementary, secondary, and postsecondary educational institutions; doing anything necessary for the proper establishment, maintenance, management, and operation of the public schools of the Virgin Islands; cooperating with the Office of Education in the administration of all acts of congress relating to general education; providing for the proper administration of funds which may be appropriated by Congress; approving or disapproving the rules and regulations proposed by the Commissioner of Education.

By statute, our Board has a lot of responsibility which can be summed up this way: the **Virgin Islands Board of Education is the leading entity for the governance and financial management of the Virgin Islands' education system.** The question remains, do they really exercise all their power, and if not, what are the impediments? Additionally, do they have the resources to do so? The University's 2002 study reported that due to power struggles, communication issues, policy disconnects, and confusion about the Board's role, the Board was unable to exercise their full power.

So, how can we improve our system with that level of *systemic* dysfunction? And, do we need to change the structure and role of our Board, or are there policies in place that should be examined and modified to empower and elevate its role?

What we have found through our research, however, is that among some of the highest performing states there are completely different organizational structures for each state's educational system. In some, the board is elected while in other states the board is appointed by the governor. And some states don't even have a 'board of education' at all. According to the National Association on State School Boards, 23 states choose to have their board of education hire their commissioner. But in some cases, states elect their commissioner and in others the choice of a commissioner is a gubernatorial appointment. The common thread among high achieving states, based on our research, is a high level of collaboration among all the key stakeholders and policymakers.

But, whether appointed, elected (like our Board of Education), or hired and whether we have a commissioner or a state superintendent, we believe that it is vital that we analyze how we select our education leaders and determine the policies that govern their roles and responsibilities.

As we move into the height of this election season, we want to challenge policymakers and all community stakeholders to consider these questions: Should our Governor continue to appoint our Commissioner of Education? Should our Commissioner be elected by the voters or hired by the Board of Education? And, who should the Commissioner of Education be responsible to, the Governor/political party in power, the Board of Education, or the people whom he/she serves?

This election season, let's ask our political candidates how committed they are to reforming our education system to ensure we put our children first.

For more information on the Foundation's Education First series, please call 773.9898.

### **Suggested Readings & Sources**

*Report on the Administrative Efficiency of the V.I. Department of Education.* (May 5, 2002).

University of the Virgin Islands. St. Croix Source

<http://stcroixsource.com/content/community/data/2002/05/25/uvi-study-education-department-efficiency-0>

National Association of State School Boards

- State Education Governance Models (2014): <http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/Governance-Models-Chart-July-2014.pdf>

Virgin Islands Board of Education

- [http://www.myviboe.com/pdf/board\\_of\\_education\\_bylaws.pdf](http://www.myviboe.com/pdf/board_of_education_bylaws.pdf)



**For Schools to Reform:  
Discipline and Structure First - *Then* Programs**

*September 17, 2014*

The issue of discipline and structure is a highly sensitive one in our community given that few campuses in the Territory have been spared the ravages of violence and chronic disciplinary infractions. According to a USVI Department of Education's St. Croix District Discipline Report issued in 2008, there were 1,232 discipline infractions among our junior high schools and 814 in our high schools during the 2007-2008 school year. Combine this with the total number of days junior high and high school students were suspended, 3187, and two things were very clear: 1) our teachers and administrators were being distracted from the business of teaching with focus increasingly shifting from instruction to behavioral management; and 2) far too many of our students were spending too much time out of the classroom.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development confirms that special programs and a rigorous curriculum alone won't raise academic achievement, and in fact, classroom management cannot be removed from the equation when determining the effectiveness of a teacher. Ultimately, the data and the research show that before we can improve academics, we must first create an environment that is conducive to learning!

We learned this lesson first-hand back in 2005, at the inception of our partnership with several public schools. At first, we naively made the decision to focus our effort *solely* on academic-based supports. However, in light of our first tumultuous and violent year, which saw ongoing unrest and several school-wide riots at one school, we quickly recognized that not focusing on structure and student discipline was indeed shortsighted. This was reinforced by our primary *stateside* public school partner, Principal Truett Abbott. We were first introduced to Mr. Abbott by way of a CNN news segment about schools that were succeeding against all odds. In that interview he related how he led his students at Warren County Middle School (WCMS) in rural Georgia to staggering academic success. Mr. Abbott not only shared his successes with us, but also spoke frankly about his challenges and the sheer *will* it took to turn his school around. In fact, during the first year of his reform efforts, he had to abort a comprehensive push to institute large-scale academic reforms in order to first focus on discipline and structure.

Mr. Abbott instituted policies that ensured teachers were **always** *supervising and interacting with students* beyond classroom instructional time, including before school, between classes, at lunchtime, and after school. He took aggressive steps to create a structured environment to ensure that everyone stayed on task all day, every day. Only after he had established the level of structure that he envisioned for his campus did he begin implementing comprehensive literacy-based programs. Nationally recognized success soon followed as students' reading scores soared from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to the 88<sup>th</sup> percentile in less than three years.

Since that time Mr. Abbott’s message has continued to ring true as structure has proven to be a critical factor in all successful reform efforts we have studied. Over the past 10 years, the Foundation has traveled with Virgin Islands stakeholders and policy makers to visit a number of model schools abroad like Robinson Elementary School in Houston and the Harlem Children's Zone in Brooklyn, where every aspect of the school day is consistently and uniformly structured. We’ve also witnessed structure like that right here at home when we worked with public school teachers and administrators to implement comprehensive classroom management procedures. Our *Classroom Management Binder*, built in concert with teachers, consisted of system-wide behavioral management policies and outlined procedures for every aspect of the school day—from how to walk between classrooms and assemble in the auditorium to how to turn in homework. Watching our partner school transform from a chaotic environment with the most disciplinary infractions in the District to an organized institution of learning with the least discipline infractions of any secondary school in the Territory in two years, was inspiring. And, it proved Mr. Abbott’s theories true for us. *Our Binder is available on the Foundation's website for any educator or administrator.*

For the Foundation, the bottom line is this: schools work best when rules are consistent from classroom to classroom as well as outside of class, such that students are not playing guessing games nor testing boundaries. Procedures also have to be communicated, rehearsed, and reinforced from the very first day of school to the last, so that students know what to expect and what is expected of them—always. Dr. Harry Wong, America’s greatest guru on classroom management emphasizes in his nationally endorsed book, “First Days of School,” that teaching students procedures for even the simplest of request, like how to ask for a pencil in the middle of a class lecture, is not an insignificant detail since it typically requires many teachers to stop their lessons to deal with one student’s small request.

As the new school year begins, we encourage our policy makers and administrators to outline the specific policies they will support and enforce so that our educators and students, at every school and across classrooms, can get down to the business of teaching and learning.

## Sources & Suggested Reading

### Behavior Management & Academic Performance

- *Whole-School Positive Behaviour Support: Effects on student discipline problems and academic performance.* (2005). The May Institute and the May Center for Applied Research, USA. File retrieved at [http://nhcebis.seresc.net/document/filename/348/PBIS - Impacts on Discipline and Academic Performance.pdf](http://nhcebis.seresc.net/document/filename/348/PBIS_-_Impacts_on_Discipline_and_Academic_Performance.pdf)
- *Classroom Management that Works.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. File retrieved at <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/103027/chapters/The-Critical-Role-of-Classroom-Management.aspx>
- *USVI Department of Education Public School Discipline Report: Discipline Report for St. Croix District.* (2008, May). USVI Department of Education: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. (p. 3-4).

### Teacher Resources & Models

- St. Croix Foundation Classroom Management Binder: <http://www.stxfoundation.org/youth-education/teacher-resources/>



*(Teacher Resources and Models Continued)*

- Effective Teaching by Harry and Rosemary Wong, First Days of School: <http://teachers.net/gazette/wong.html>
- Robinson Elementary School: <http://www.houstonisd.org/robinson>
- Warren County Middle School: <http://www.wcps.k12.va.us/wcms/>

\* A copy of the CNN interview with Principal Truett Abbott can be found at the bottom of the transcript located at: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0607/10/ldt.01.html>



## **EDUCATION FIRST Trust**

*September 24, 2014*

Historically, whenever those responsible for our local education system (i.e. the Board of Education, Department of Education and teachers' union) convene before the Senate, there has been a contentious and argumentative game of blame. In fact, in most struggling school districts one can often find a fair share of finger-pointing about the issues and challenges facing that educational system. While many believe that power-struggles and a lack of accountability are at the heart of these historic disagreements, St. Croix Foundation believes that another underlying factor to these conflicts is actually *trust*-- or the lack thereof.

As one of the most active community-based education stakeholders in the Territory, the Foundation has grown keenly aware of the enormous role which trust plays in building and sustaining meaningful private-public partnerships. So much so that, despite our shared goals, fidelity, and \$1,000,000-plus investment of scarce resources into our public education system, we have at times been exposed to some intense hostility and rancor by education stakeholders that we considered partners.

What has become abundantly clear to us is that both education leaders *and* community stakeholders must find middle ground in order to develop the necessary partnerships that produce measurable outcomes for our students and our public schools. But for that to happen, all stakeholders must first come to recognize that so long as the success of our children is central to everyone's agenda, then *we are all on the same side*.

While no consolation, we are not alone. There are, indeed, districts around the nation and countries around the world that are contending with the very same challenge of building consensus and employing collaboration-- of creating Trust. One country's story of systemic education transformation that we keep referring back to is Finland, partly because it was long, it was arduous, and it worked! Not only did the process take many years, but it began with one central focus: TRUST.

To begin the process of system-wide educational transformation, Finland first developed a consensus on the importance and purpose of education. They clearly defined why the process of reform was even necessary. They determined, collectively, that learning had to be "sacrosanct" -- revered by everyone in the country. Finns very shrewdly decided that at the core of their system would be exemplary teacher training, because they believed that if they could trust *teachers* in the classroom, first and foremost, they could create a system that didn't require 'inspectors' or evaluations throughout the system. Then, they professionalized their teacher training programs, educating their teachers like doctors. As a result, embedded in Finland's system is a high degree of trust that teachers are doing their jobs and doing it at the highest standard. They firmly believe that

a compliance-based system whereby people were checking up on teachers would result in a lack of focus on teaching.

In the end, it took 25 long years for education stakeholders in Finland to learn how to trust one another. But today, they have an international model of educational reform based primarily on *trust*, collaboration, and professionalism wherein the Ministry trusts municipalities and municipalities trust schools. Then, by virtue of the rigor of their teacher training, there is more rigor in the classroom and as a result schools implicitly trust teachers; and parents trust the whole system. While the system is not perfect and there are still areas in need of reform, Finland is one model of how to approach system-wide reform.

The Foundation believes there are some very specific ways that the Territory can start the process of fostering more *trusting*, high-impact partnerships among all stakeholders particularly between private and public sectors in support of high-quality education, including the following:

- Nurture and sustain high levels of accountability, transparency and open lines of communication between all stakeholders
- Educate the community on the system itself: how and why it works
- Diversify brokers and invite the private sector to the table when important decisions need to be made, so that school and District leaders can marry strengths and overcome weaknesses—in turn, netting greater results for all.

It is universally understood that for schools to be successful, the entire community must support them. So this Election Season, let's ask our candidates what policies they are willing to support that will engender collaboration and trust in our educational system. We believe two points of agreement we can begin with are that the interest of our children must always come first and that our teachers should be the most highly trained professionals in the region.

This election year, let's make education our priority.

### **Sources & Suggested Readings**

*In teachers they trust:* <http://www.todayonline.com/commentary/teachers-they-trust>

*The school district's big trust problem:* <http://parentsunitedphila.com/2014/03/24/the-school-districts-big-trust-problem/>



## **EDUCATION FIRST**

### **Public School *Models* that Make a Difference**

*October 1, 2014*

Over the past 10 years, St. Croix Foundation has developed partnerships with major education reform organizations like the International Center for Leadership in Education and Grantmakers for Education. Through organizations like these, we continue to learn about innovative, leading edge educational models and best practices that are truly making a difference in struggling school systems around the country. In light of the current state of our own public schools, we believe that some of these educational models could present pathways toward the rapid transformation of our own system. Here are some examples:

#### **Robinson Elementary School**

Last year, a local delegation sponsored by the Foundation visited Robinson Elementary, an Apollo 20 program in Houston, Texas. Launched in response to the threat of a state take-over of schools that were failing to make adequate yearly progress, the Houston Independent School District instituted radical changes to the curriculum and organizational structure of 20 public schools. Today, the success that they are achieving can be attributed to new guidelines developed in partnership with Harvard University's Education Innovation Laboratory, which include the following:

- A mandate from the Superintendent to revise the Administrator Preparatory Curriculum at local universities to focus on training "Turnaround Specialists" in order to build greater capacity in the District's principal pool
- An extended school day for *all* 4<sup>th</sup> graders in response to data that shows that poor reading skills beyond the 4<sup>th</sup> grade become increasingly difficult to remediate
- Use of university math tutors for *all* 3<sup>rd</sup> graders
- A culture of high expectations

At Robinson Elementary, principal and staff are carefully chosen and are given extensive, specialized training in the math and reading programs used in the school. Most impressive is a math program that provides one tutor per four students for 20 minutes each day. With a marked increase in test scores and a proven decline in its dropout rate, Houston is proving that large districts can indeed transform their systems successfully.

#### **New American Academy**

The New American Academy started as a pilot project developed and implemented through an unlikely partnership between the New York City teachers' union, the local Department of Education and Harvard University. Located in Brooklyn, the New American Academy is a public school model designed from the perspective that student achievement is directly tied to teacher quality. Some key features of New American include:

- Teachers are in a four-step career ladder with a competitive pay scale. Promotion is based on a comprehensive review of competence and ability, not just test scores or seniority.

- Classrooms have teams of four teachers who work with 60-65 students within a grade-level, reducing the teacher to student ratio to 15:1. In addition to a Master Teacher, each team includes licensed Special Education and English Second Language teachers.
- Teacher Teams meet daily in 90 minute sessions to collaborate and engage in peer reviews.
- New American students also 'loop' with their classmates and teaching team for five years, with a constant of at least one teacher repeating each year, which allows for the development of trust among students, parents, and teachers.

### **Harlem Children's Zone**

The Harlem Children's Zone, founded back in 1970 by renowned educator Geoffrey Canada, has sought to provide a continuum of support services for children from cradle to college. With the ultimate goal of breaking the cycle of poverty, HCZ features comprehensive wrap around social services for children and their families in a 100 block area of Harlem. In recent years, it has been lauded as a national model for its 95% college acceptance rate and for ensuring that 100% of their preschoolers test school-ready. The program consists of:

- A Baby College for parents of children ages 0–3
- All-day pre-kindergarten
- Extended-day charter schools
- Health clinics and community centers for children and adults during after-school, weekend and summer hours
- Youth violence prevention programs
- College admissions and retention support services

These models represent just a handful of 21<sup>st</sup> Century educational models that the Foundation has toured. What we have learned is that there are no silver bullets! Most reform models are, in many instances, replete with as many challenges as successes. If the Virgin Islands is to *finally* get serious about the business of educational transformation, we need to determine what pieces of successful models will work for us and which ones won't. But, in order to do that, we first need to gain an intimate understanding of our system- identifying our assets and liabilities *as well as our values*- so that we can begin to make informed decisions. This Election Season, we challenge all candidates running for public office to begin really "learning" our system so they can all be active, informed leaders in an educational revolution here in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

### **Sources**

- New American Academy: <http://www.thenewamericanacademy.org/>
- Robinson Elementary School: <http://www.houstonisd.org/robinson>
- Harlem Children's Zone: <http://hcz.org/>
- International Center for Leadership in Education: <http://www.leadered.com/>
- Grantmakers for Education: <http://www.edfunders.org/our-community/about-gfe>



## **EDUCATION FIRST**

### **Do You Know the Stark Realities?**

*October 8, 2014*

The economy, health care, and public safety are hot topics across the nation, and the Virgin Islands is no different. Locally, the critical discussions generated around these issues will ultimately shape our future and will reflect to the world what we value as a community. At the Foundation, we believe that at the end of the day, a strong economy, excellent hospitals, and safe streets are all extensions of a healthy community, which is why we have been such staunch advocates for the remodeling of our struggling educational system.

Every year, when reports are released on how our children are faring, we immediately begin to assess the degree to which our community is paying attention and taking decisive actions to address those challenges facing our youth. What we often observe, beyond the valiant efforts of our key education stakeholders, is chronic apathy.

All the while with each passing year, the pressure increases- pressure on our families who must contend with a weak economy and higher crime rates; pressure on our education leaders to meet existing mandates and adopt new national standards like Common Core; and pressure on our public school teachers to implement those standards, which will likely challenge our students and educators beyond their current capacity.

So, today as we strive to mobilize our community to join us in a decisive push for revolutionary reforms in our public schools, we thought we would take a moment to restate some of the stark realities that motivate the Foundation to keep raising awareness and advocating for our children, for our teachers... for a brighter future for this Territory:

- 70% of 11th graders on St. Croix cannot read at grade level (VI DOE 2012-13).
- 59% of 11th graders on St. Thomas/St. John cannot read at grade level (VI DOE 2012-13).
- 50% of incoming kindergartners did not have the language skills they needed to learn and express themselves at school (2013 Kids Count).
- 34% of kindergartners did not have the basic cognitive skills for counting and using numbers and logic (2013 Kids Count).
- 614 per 100,000 of our young people committed violent crimes in 2011. US national rate: 225/100,000 (2013 Kids Count).
- 2 out every 3 children who drop out of school in the Virgin Islands are young men (2013 Kids Count).
- Nearly 7% of Virgin Islands teens ages 15-17 were not enrolled in school in 2010, compared with 4% of teens nationwide (PRB Report: Children in the US Virgin Islands).
- 88% of public school graduates enrolling in UVI are required to take remedial English (UVI).

**Did you know that education equals a strong economy?**

And, just a few reasons why we believe that education is the key:

- In less than 10 years, more than 14 million new jobs will open or be created in the United States (Georgetown University). 2/3 of these jobs will require a high school diploma, and at least one year of college or vocational training will be required for positions including construction and mechanical trades (Georgetown University).
- Education reform can improve a nation's GDP by 36% (Education First).

We know that all stakeholders are working tirelessly to improve our public education system. Our final conclusion, however, is that the pace and precision of educational reform here in the VI is far behind that of most states and industrialized countries around the world. With these harsh realities and the future of our Territory in our hands, we ask all our candidates who are touting economic development plans this question: “For whom are we developing our economy if our children are unprepared to participate?”



## **EDUCATION FIRST**

### **There's Nothing Common about Common Core**

*October 15, 2014*

In 2009, Common Core State Standards were developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association and adopted by the US DOE for the purpose of providing clear and consistent learning goals to help prepare students for college, career, and life. As defined by the Common Core State Standards [CCSS] Initiative the new standards "clearly demonstrate what students are expected to learn at each grade level, so that every parent and teacher can understand and support their learning. While the standards set grade-specific goals, they do not define how the standards should be taught or which materials should be used to support students."

States were all given a choice to adopt both math and English/Language Arts standards. Most states (including the Virgin Islands) chose both standards while some states, like Minnesota, elected to adopt only one set of standards. Some chose to pass on them altogether. For Common Core states like Tennessee, the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools concluded it was the right choice because "the world is not the same as it was in the 1950s, 60s, or even just a few years ago. Jobs are different, college is different and our schools must be different. We have to teach in a completely new way, focused on mastering skills and working through problems instead of rote memorization. Our standards have to be more rigorous and our expectations higher if our students are ever going to be able to compete in a global society."

Of course, as is common with most revolutionary changes in education, the Common Core Standards have generated some raging debates about necessity and equity. According to Parents For Public Schools there are pros and cons to Common Core:

#### **Some Pros**

- CCSS focus on core concepts and procedures starting in the early grades, which gives teachers the time needed to teach them and gives students the time needed to master them.
- The standards draw on the most important international models, as well as research and input from numerous sources, including educators from kindergarten through college, state departments of education, scholars, assessment developers, professional organizations, parents and students, and members of the public.
- The multi-assessment feature of Common Core State Standards requires that students come up with their own answers and defend them, ensuring the development of high-level thinking skills.



### **Some Common Core Cons**

- It will take time for both students and teachers to adjust to the New Common Core State Standards, and the transition will require new ways of teaching and learning.
- Because Common Core assessments will be on-line, school districts will be forced to spend more on technology and to be sure all students have access to these tools.
- Common Core State Standards will lead to even more high-stakes testing, at a time when many parents are already fighting the over-use of testing and opting out their children.

### **Implementation**

Yet another major challenge for school districts is just *how* to implement Common Core. And, from what we've seen thus far, implementation will be a particularly painstaking challenge for the Virgin Islands. Last school year, we actually sat through some of the tests which will be given to elementary students, and we didn't score very well. So we have a keen understanding of how much needs to be done in our schools to prepare our children and our teachers.

At the Foundation, we believe that any new standards, curriculum, or program must be accompanied by support for teachers and principals. We have begun to do just this through our Sprint to Excellence Fund which has awarded close to \$20,000 to local public schools to support Common Core, including pre-testing students and capacity building for teachers for the 2014-2015 school year.

So, can our students and teachers rise to the challenge of Common Core? Of course, and schools like the one we are supporting are proof of that. But, according to the Center for Education Policy, our schools' success relies on informed state and district policymakers, because Common Core is putting pressure on governments to assess current policy and ensure funding is in place for new student materials and teacher professional development. Of greater import is the need for policymakers across the nation to study and truly understand how their public education systems are structured and organized in order to assess what strategies and policies best support implementation.

As we near Election Day, St. Croix Foundation encourages every policymaker and education stakeholder to read the standards which can be found here: <http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/> and analyze our system itself so that they can hit the ground running to support our schools.

### **SOURCES & SUGGESTED READING**

*Common Core State Standards Initiative:* <http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/>

*Common Core State Standards Pros and Cons. Parents 4 Public Schools:*  
[http://www.parents4publicschools.org/Documents/Common\\_core\\_chart\\_final.pdf](http://www.parents4publicschools.org/Documents/Common_core_chart_final.pdf)

*Center on Education Policy: Common Core State Standards in 2014: Districts' Perceptions, Progress, and Challenges:* <http://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=440>

*A Research Agenda for the Common Core State Standards: What Information Do Policymakers Need?* <http://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=436>



## EDUCATION FIRST Vision 2015

October 22, 2014

In 2010, the state of Delaware won first place in the nation's Race to the Top grant program and, in turn, was awarded over \$119 million dollars in federal grant money for their public education reform efforts. In reality, Delaware's success was spearheaded by a nonprofit organization called the Rodel Foundation. With a mission of improving student achievement across the state and ultimately for Delaware to rank number 1 in the nation, over the course of several years, Rodel strived to galvanize both education and business communities around the need to transform their entire education system. To build their strategic plan, they convened a 24 member steering committee that was carefully selected and comprised "senior leaders from each of the critical [education] sectors" - a noble yet naïve endeavor in the world of public education.

Through every stage of their consensus building efforts, tensions and challenges arose, but as Marty Linksky, Rodel's lead steering committee facilitator pointed out, "In order to reach a much higher goal for the children of Delaware, each participant would have to agree to disappoint some portion of his or her own constituency... as participants committed to reaching an agreement on 85 percent of the resulting agenda, realizing each party might resist about 15 percent."

In 2006, Rodel publicly released their report entitled ***Vision 2015***. And while today it is a comprehensive plan containing 45 specific recommendations for education reform, it took almost 3 years after its release for it to be endorsed by all senior members of every stakeholder group in the state of Delaware. After years of research and relationship building, ***Vision 2015*** was fully and finally adopted by stakeholders in 2009 with the following objectives and recommendations:

- **Set high expectations for all students:** make sure standards match those of the highest performing nations and; require state funding for 140 additional school hours per year.
- **Invest in early childhood education:** mandate annual license renewals for all early childcare and education providers; build a data system to enable *pre*-kindergarten and K-12 programs to share information seamlessly and track the educational progress of students.
- **Develop and support high quality teachers:** treat teachers as professionals with increased pay and a new career path; strengthen higher education's teacher preparation and professional development programs; establish professional development centers to allow teachers and principals to share best practices and; create incentives and supports for schools to help new teachers succeed.
- **Empower principals:** give skilled principals broader control of decision making related to people, resources, and time; create a statewide leadership academy to serve as a one-stop center for world class principal recruitment, retention, induction, and professional development.

- **Encourage innovation and require accountability:** create a statewide *Office of Innovation* to disseminate best practices and new programs to schools and communities; create a pool of funds to strengthen school-community and school-business partnerships; define what it means to be a world-class school and; identify and provide funding to start and replicate best practice schools that work.
- **Establish a simple and equitable funding system:** create a weighted student funding formula to provide different funding for students with different needs; distribute these funds directly to districts and schools, giving principals flexibility in how these funds are spent, along with accountability for results; engage in a careful analysis of how current education dollars could be spent more effectively or allocated differently.

While implementation of the plan was largely contingent upon funding by Race to the Top and building political will, today, Vision 2015 has become a national model for comprehensive, whole system reforms, and we believe that it is a blueprint that the Virgin Islands can use to develop our own Vision for the future.

Overall, the St. Croix Foundation found the story of Rodel compelling. It is a model of education reform that we believe has legitimacy because in order to change educational outcomes and to build a foundation for economic prosperity, communities like ours must first build consensus. But, to build consensus, our constituents, and more specifically our policymakers, must gain a deep understanding of our system. And then, we need to finally set aside the bickering, bipartisanship, and years of finger pointing so that we can collectively strive for one common goal: Putting our children first!

It's time for all stakeholders to put down their swords, raise the white flags, and surrender entrenched positions so we can get serious about educating our children. As we near what many will agree is one of the most important elections in recent history here in the Virgin Islands, we challenge our political candidates and policymakers to make a commitment to creating a real Vision for our schools and to leading this Territory toward social progress and prosperity. It's time!

### **Sources & Suggested Readings**

***Persistence and Agility: The Rodel Foundation of Delaware's Efforts to Transform Delaware's Education System:*** [http://www.edfunders.org/sites/default/files/case\\_8\\_rodel.pdf](http://www.edfunders.org/sites/default/files/case_8_rodel.pdf)

***Vision 2015: Imagine:*** <http://www.vision2015delaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Vision-Plan.pdf>



## **EDUCATION FIRST What Next?**

*October 29, 2014*

Because of the scope of the St. Croix Foundation's work and the diverse partnerships we've built over the last 24 years, each year we gain greater clarity about how to effectively address our community's needs. We sit on public safety committees and listen to the challenges and new initiatives to tackle them. We listen to our sister nonprofits discuss the social ills plaguing our Territory and the strategies they are employing to heal them, and we work closely with many public sector agencies seeking to support the delivery of services for those in greatest need. What we have learned is that everyone is working tirelessly to institute reforms that will put our children and Territory on the path to prosperity. Yet despite our collective efforts and investments of time and money, we are still talking about the same problems after 20 or more years of trying to fix them.

Having concluded that almost all roads surrounding our most pressing socio-economic problems lead back to education over the past 10 years, we have invested over a million dollars and volunteered thousands of hours in service to our public schools, educators, and students. We have seen the inner workings of our system, interfacing with key policymakers and leadership teams from the very top of our educational system to working in the trenches with teachers and students.

Today, when we look at our community, there's no question that we are in the midst of an urgent, unprecedented economic and social crisis. And the state of our children is particularly catastrophic. For years, the Foundation described the Territory's children in terms of their academic failings. Now, we believe the situation is much graver. Our children are drowning. Even more chilling than that, our children are in fact dying. In the USVI, in 2010, the death rate of children ages 15 to 19 was 145 per 100,000 teens, the highest level in a decade and *three times* that of the national rate.

While we recognize this is the result of a myriad of social failures, as a society we have *all* failed to act. We have failed to meet an urgent crisis with an urgent response. We have failed our children because, as we look out at them drowning, the life rafts we keep throwing at them are simply too small, too few, too tattered, and too outdated. We have spent years building strategic plans and engaging in discussions and debates about the problems and possible solutions, but we have simply not behaved like guardians witnessing their wards crying out for help.

As we stand in the middle of a raging storm, how can we be cautious and tentative in the strategies we employ to save our children? Here we are, in 2014, still weighing the viability of education reform strategies that have proven successful. And all the while, countries around the world that lagged behind the U.S. in every social and economic indicator are outpacing old frontrunners. And they're doing so by being audacious in their response.

The Foundation believes that the real issue before all of us is not whether one strategy is more

radical or risky than the other, but rather how do we begin releasing outdated strategies that no longer serve us or our children and begin embracing innovation and change. This should be an exciting moment in the history of these islands. The possibilities are endless. The roads have been cut and paved for us, and there are now detailed roadmaps to help us chart our course.

As a community-based organization, every day we challenge ourselves to be courageous and resolute in our mission to serve and advocate for those things we believe will empower the least of us for the benefit of all of us. We do this at the risk of being unpopular or standing alone at times because we fundamentally believe that it is our civic obligation. Over the past 18 weeks, we have published editorials and advertisements to raise awareness on the importance of public education to our economy and social wellbeing; to provide information on a variety of reform models; to galvanize education stakeholders and policymakers to learn the system, analyze it, and reform it where necessary, and to encourage voters to demand that their candidates do so.

This November 4th is about finding the pathway to the progress we all need and desire. The chance to make rapid, deep inroads in our educational system and other social systems is profound. But the first step starts with real leadership. This November 4th we must select leaders with the vision and the courage to nurture greater tolerance within our community for sweeping, revolutionary reforms in the Territory. As we enter the voting booth, let us all be fierce, tireless advocates for our children's success and social welfare! And when the election is over, let's demand that it remains so. In reality, our children need every one of us. And we need them





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